

**1914** It Was Their Time

**2014** It Gave Us Ours

## Remembering Cambridge 1914-1918



When war came in August 1914 the fear of invasion was a major concern, and a Home Defence army was raised, with the Eastern Division based at the University Arms Hotel in Cambridge.

Members of the 53<sup>rd</sup> (Welsh) Division were billeted in Cambridge college boathouses. In December 1914 a heavy downpour saw the Cam burst its banks. Boathouses and yards were flooded and soldiers had to seek billets elsewhere, including private houses.

Germany had invaded Belgium, and the University offered facilities for Belgian professors. A Belgian University was established with 30 professors and 130

students. Belgian refugees arrived, based initially at the Lion Hotel.

The August Bank Holiday Mammoth Show 1914 was disrupted when announcements were made for postmen to return to work so that they could deliver the call-up papers summoning reservists back to duty.

The 6th Division of the field artillery were mobilised in Cambridge in August 1914, with the Cambridgeshire Regiment including contingents from Wisbech, March and Ely billeted in schools. The regimental colours were marched under escort to Great St Mary's and handed over for safe keeping. Horses, lorries and vans were all commandeered

Many of Cambridge's commons were used to billet troops, such as Jesus Green, above. Local residents brought hot meals for the men and the Wesley Church opened a recreation room. All was not well, though, as the pubs closed at 9pm and soldiers were constantly pestered by hawkers.

for the transport of troops and many Cambridge buses were requisitioned for war duty.

For the first time this was to be a war that was fought from the sky. German zeppelins were a real threat, and Cambridge shops took out air raid insurance. From March 1915 no lights could be visible in the city after dark, and streets lamps were all turned out. In October 1917 a first air raid warning was sounded in Cambridge, but no bombs fell.



## The University plays its part

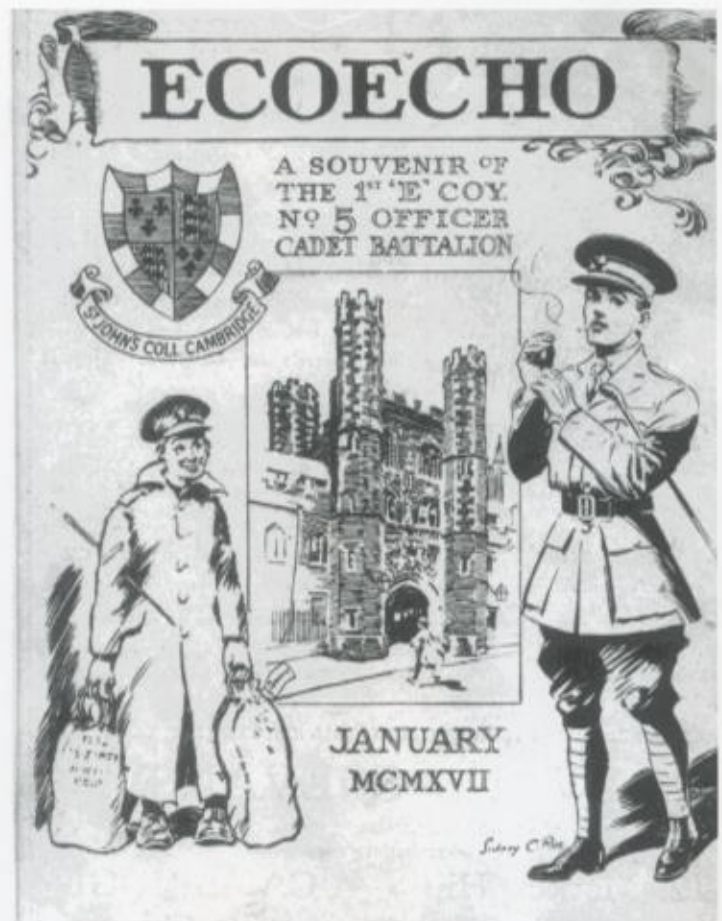
University departments contributed greatly to the war effort.

The Engineering Laboratory worked on the design of tanks and their engines, bridging equipment and high explosives. A captured German aeroplane was given to the University to be housed in the Engineering Laboratories (it is still there). The Chemical Laboratory worked on poison gas and gas masks, aircraft gunnery and apparatus for dropping bombs, and the Cavendish investigated signalling, submarine detection devices and ways of protecting airships from lightning. Professor J.J. Thomson assisted the Ministry of Munitions inventions branch, archaeologists with knowledge of Greece helped plan naval attacks and university language specialists became translators.

Cambridge dons were to be found in the War Office, Admiralty, Treasury, Foreign Office and Ministry of Munitions. Senior members of the university's staff were needed to help manufacture shells, and the Corporation released 60 men for munitions work by delaying tramline removal.

When war broke out, Pembroke at once began including elementary war training in college. Initially the War Office objected, but the training worked well and was officially adopted, becoming the 1<sup>st</sup> Officers Training School. Many other colleges followed suit, and since they were faced with a drastic shortage of undergraduates, for the first time the University admitted men who did not know Latin and Greek.

The whole of Whewell's court at Trinity was occupied by rank and file troops, and the Great Court of Trinity became a parade ground.



Officer Cadets were taught to become gentlemen, with officers dining with dons on Top Table and paying 5/- (around 25p) a day for their meals in colleges, which received 3/- a day for billeting.

However, in the town, "lodging-house keepers who found their rooms unoccupied would be glad to do it for less." Landladies who relied on the income from undergraduates were unable to keep up payments on their furniture and were often summonsed for non-payment of rates. As a result they asked the War Office to billet more troops in the town.



Cambridgeshire Regiment soldiers with vehicle

The Cambridgeshire Regiment was a territorial battalion, and when the local recruiting offices had fulfilled their quota many men walked to Bedford or Bury to enlist.

Large numbers of students joined up; 3,400 applied for commissions in the first two years, and the number of students remaining in university dropped from 3,181 in 1914 to fewer than 400 by 1917.

Local men flocked to join from every parish. Mr. and Mrs. Collis, of Hemingford Road, Cambridge, held a very proud record, for besides having five sons serving in the Army, Mr. Collis had by his side two brothers, three brothers-in-law, one son-in-law, two grandsons and 14 nephews, making a total of 27 relatives serving King and country.





In 1917 Cambridge housewives searched in vain for Christmas puddings. There was hardship everywhere.

Queuing for potatoes (left, in Mill Road) became common, and several butchers closed down because of high prices and shortage of supplies.

The Birds Vinegar works opposite Trinity college closed and communal kitchens were opened in Church Street.

## Spies and munitions

Cambridge Instrument Company had become a 'controlled factory' by the Ministry of Munitions in 1915 and was only allowed to do work of national importance. The number of employees increased.

Items such as hydrogen level alarm systems, anti-submarine devices and mine detectors were made at a secret factory at the Roller Skating Rink in Magrath Avenue.

As there were secrets to discover there were many stories of spies.

A suspected spy was arrested by soldiers carrying bayonets in Mill Road in February 1915.

The troops in Cambridge produced magazines showing wartime scenes and there were tank battles on the Gogs as part of military manoeuvres.

This brought additional hazards to the town. Edwin Jennings, of Hartington Grove had three fingers of one hand blown off, when his brother had been to the "sham fight" (cadet manoeuvres) on the Gog Magog Hills in the afternoon and had brought home a

was a small metal tube embedded in sand. Whilst examining it, it exploded. Another boy, Onyett by name, had taken a similar canvas bag home, and with other boys had been using it as a ball.

## Pacifism emerges

However, not everybody felt equally motivated and a Cambridge branch of the Union of Democratic Controls was established. The University group had 170 members, who were generally denounced as "pacifist cranks." They included Bertram Russell, who was suspended from his Fellowship.

Some undergraduates refused to fight. One who refused to carry out military orders or do work of a military kind whilst in prison was placed in a dark cell, fed bread and water, put in irons and then sent to France. Another Cambridge man was given three months hard labour for trying to stop people joining up. There were peace meetings, but "anybody who rents halls for pacifist meetings risks having it damaged."

## Difficulties increase

Margarine queues assumed such alarming dimensions on one Saturday that one person was injured and others fainted.

The Borough Food Control Committee suggested that traders should transfer their stocks of margarine to the Corn Exchange and sell it there. Between 2 and 4 o'clock 1,000 transactions in margarine had taken place.

An order for at least 800 uniforms was distributed between the tailors of the town. However, even this presented a difficulty, as so many tailors had been called up.

The local newspapers explained what a German invasion of Cambridge would be like:

*"The University Library, Senate House & Kings College Chapel would be fired, shell-fire would rake the range of colleges along the Backs and the University labs razed to the ground; the Mayor and Vice Chancellor, ministers of religion and editors of newspapers would be lined up and shot, male inhabitants herded into compounds and women and children driven out."*





Injured soldiers being disembarked at Cambridge railway station

Some of the soldiers who'd previously been under canvas at Cambridge were returned to the city badly wounded.

The First Eastern General Hospital started initially in the Leys School, and was then moved to Trinity College. It was able to cater for 500 of the wounded.

Soon much more space was needed, so on 11 acres of land just across from the Backs, where the University Library now stands, a massive pre-fabricated hospital was erected. In Sept 1917 the first batch of wounded from the battle of the Dardanelles arrived, and in the next month 1,200 wounded arrived within a 10 day period.

### Women's lives

Women's roles changed significantly as women stepped in to do the work previously done by men. There was a need for women police constables, and ultimately the Star Brewery was staffed almost entirely by women. Women also took on postal deliveries and even shovelling coke at the Gas Works.

Married women were allowed to vote in January 1917, and at this election Mrs Adean was selected as the first woman County Council

### Armistice Celebrations

Throughout early November the world stood waiting, until at 10.30 on Monday 11th, British Prime Minister Lloyd George announced the Armistice had been signed.

The news reached Cambridge at 11 o'clock and spread like wildfire. Cambridge residents hung out bunting, an effigy of the Kaiser was hoisted on the point of a bayonet and carried through the streets, to be consigned to the flames of a Market Hill bonfire, while students broke into the bell tower of Great St Mary's.

Ugly scenes occurred when students broke the windows of the Cambridge Magazine which had published poems describing the hardships of war and had advocated pacifism. Two other shops in the same occupation were treated in similar fashion.

Of the Cambridgeshire Regiment nearly 900 did not return - 77 officers and 789 other ranks killed or died of wounds, over 5,000 others wounded.

As well as the main Cambridge war memorial erected in 1922, parishes erected memories to their fallen - St Mark's in Newnham, split from the parish of Grantchester in 1916, listed the names of 51 dead.

## Cambridge

In the quiet town of Cambridge

Two peoples shall meet.

They shall look strangely each at other.

The very tread of their feet

As they pass along the street

Shall show of which camp they are,

Tell whether they come from schoolrooms,

Or from countries far.

You shall know them by their faces;

Some shall be hard, and brown,

With keen eyes scanning distances,

As they walk about the town.

And strangely the light gown

Shall flutter from shoulders square,

And the cap shall sit curiously

On close-cropped hair.

You shall know them by their habits

For, when the nights are bright,

The half of them shall leave their beds

And sleep in the moonlight.

But the others shall spend the night,

With thanks to God, in bed.

They have had too much of sleeping out

With the stars overhead.

They shall speak kindly one to another.

Across gulfs of space.

But they shall speak with alien tongues,

Each an alien race.

They shall find no meeting place,

No common speech at all;

And the years between, like mocking owls,

Shall hoot and call.

Constance Macaulay

With thanks to Mike Petty for leading the research and producing this material.

You can find more information in the displays at the event, and from [www.cambridgeshirehistory.com/](http://www.cambridgeshirehistory.com/)